

Aligning College- and Career-Ready Standards with Instructional Frameworks and Rubrics

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Education leaders throughout the nation are implementing two major reforms: new and more rigorous teacher evaluation systems and college- and career-ready standards (CCRS). Both are part of a comprehensive reform effort to achieve significant student outcome gains and close achievement gaps. Educators recognize the importance of linking these two reforms, but doing so poses several challenges. A central challenge is how to integrate new CCRS with classroom observations, a core component of nearly all new evaluation systems.

As part of their effort to support students graduating ready for college and the workforce, many States are electing to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS are different from previous standards. They are more rigorous and require a focus on depth over breadth of content knowledge. As www.commoncore.org suggests, “The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach.” Yet the standards have significant, practical implications for instructional practice.

Take, for example, a writing standard that requires students be able “to write about what they read,” and a speaking and listening standard that sets the expectation that “students will share findings from their research.”¹ Although it does not specify instructional practices, clearly teachers must design their instruction in ways that will achieve these

student outcomes. Expectations for excellent teaching, expressed in instructional frameworks and rubrics used in classroom observation should be designed or updated accordingly. If they do not reflect the instructional behaviors that meeting the standards requires, then the CCSS and evaluation reform efforts will struggle to succeed.

To help States meet the challenges of aligning new standards, including the CCSS, with new evaluation systems, the Reform Support Network (RSN) convened a group of experts in May 2013. These experts reviewed instructional observation frameworks against CCSS. Although not required, the majority of States and districts are implementing CCSS; therefore the experts felt doing so would provide the most relevant analysis. These experts observed challenges experienced when aligning these systems and developed guiding principles for States to consider as they implement these reforms:

- Frameworks and rubrics, both new and revised, are extremely complex. Often, designers simply pile CCSS ideas on top of pre-existing material. The tools also often contain redundancies and are riddled with jargon. Designers should work to reduce framework and rubric complexity, using clear meaningful practice-focused language aligned to CCSS.
- Observation rubrics and frameworks can become so vague that they fail to illustrate best practices. Focusing on what is most important to the standards helps ensure greater specificity. While the length of some rubrics and frameworks make them difficult to use, and developers should consider streamlining them,

¹ Retrieved from <http://www.commoncore.org> on June 24, 2013.

they must take care to ensure that the language of streamlined instruments does not become so vague that it fails to illustrate best practices. Focusing on what is most important to the standards helps ensure greater specificity.

- While issues of manageability, expediency and fiscal responsibility might require content neutral frameworks and rubrics, developers and users should find ways to infuse their use with grade-level and subject-specific content.
- Almost all frameworks and rubrics focus on teacher, not student, behaviors or outputs. Regardless of the approach, designers and users should be able to articulate how student outcomes drive decisions about what is and is not included in the rubric.

In advance of the convening, the RSN thoroughly reviewed instructional observation frameworks and rubrics to identify a set for analysis by the experts. To ensure a balanced selection, the RSN chose frameworks and rubrics from three different settings. The selected texts came from Race to the Top States, a charter-school management organization, and private organizations unaffiliated with States or school districts:

1. Denver Public Schools, Framework for Effective Teaching
2. District of Columbia Public Schools, IMPACT
3. Memphis City Schools, Teacher Effectiveness Measure Framework and Rubric
4. Newark Public Schools, Framework for Effective Teaching
5. Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers
6. Achievement First, Teaching Excellence Framework
7. The Danielson Group, The Framework for Teaching
8. Insight Education Group, The Insight Core Framework

The RSN did not convene the group to produce a consensus of thought; rather, it asked the experts through their analysis of frameworks and rubrics to raise questions that the field should answer. This paper outlines the group's discussions in the context of four guiding principles that emerged as they considered how to better align rubrics and frameworks with CCSS.

Experts Convened by the RSN in May 2013

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Guiding Principles and the Discussions that Produced Them



Principle #1

Principle One:

Frameworks and rubrics, both new and revised, are extremely complex. Often, designers simply pile CCSS ideas on top of pre-existing material. The tools also often contain redundancies and are riddled with jargon. Designers should work to reduce framework and rubric complexity, using clear meaningful practice-focused language aligned to CCSS.

Some developers have added CCSS ideas and themes to frameworks and rubrics at use in the field before the arrival of new required standards. Experts at the convening found these revisions made already complex documents more complex and hard to use. In analyzing these instruments, experts noticed that references to the standards are hard to find, as they are buried or overshadowed by other concepts that do not directly align with the CCSS.

In many frameworks and rubrics that jurisdictions or private entities revised from existing instruments, the experts found ideas seemed to be simply added to frameworks to align them with the CCSS, with little subtracted. As the experts analyzed the frameworks, they noticed that these “add-ons” make the instruments larger, more cumbersome and simply overwhelming. They contain so much content that references to the standards are difficult to discern.

One local educational agency, for example, had revised its framework to include CCSS language and ideas. But an important CCSS focus, the concept of “academic vocabulary,” is mentioned only once in the “Teach” domain. The concept is buried in this domain, which alone has a total of six subdomains and 34 indicators. With so much content to consider and with CCSS ideas so hard to find, the experts doubted that teachers would actually get feedback on teaching that supports CCSS implementation.

Several experts noticed that in some instruments added CCSS ideas and language appear multiple times

without clear rationale for the repetition. In one widely used framework, references to “complex texts” appear in three different areas and two different domains, twice in the “Planning and Preparation” domain and once in the “Instruction” domain. In another framework from a State education agency, the CCSS idea of proficiency in using technology and digital media appears three different times, twice in “Teachers facilitate learning for their students” and once in “Teachers reflect on their practice.”

These redundancies raised several questions and concerns. The experts asked how observers and teachers were supposed to make sense of the different references. Did the repetitions signal to teachers and observers that the framework gave more weight to these ideas? If so, for what reason? Experts also wondered if these redundancies could affect the feedback that a teacher would receive. For example, in the framework where references to “text complexity” turn up in two different domains, what if a teacher is rated proficient in one but not the other? What is the difference between the idea of text complexity in “Planning and Preparation” and in “Instruction?” Are the distinctions between text complexity in each domain clear enough to give accurate and actionable feedback? Ultimately, the experts agreed that these CCSS redundancies in the rubrics are confusing. Apparent attempts to be comprehensive produced instruments unlikely to yield feedback on instruction that matters to the implementation of the CCSS.

Experts identified other challenges in frameworks and rubrics, regardless of whether they were revised or created from the ground up with the CCSS in mind. In both types, the experts found CCSS concepts expressed in jargon that fails to explain needed shifts in instruction. For example, many frameworks repeatedly use the word “rigor” but in different contexts—“rigorous tasks” in one framework, “rigorous texts” in another and “appropriate rigor” in a third. But what does “rigor” in the CCSS really mean? None of these tools articulate the idea of rigor for CCSS in their language or in their differentiation of proficiency levels. According to one expert, the jargon could distract from CCSS and could lead to their misuse or misunderstanding.

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Fortunately, language from the CCSS themselves appear in some instruments that experts analyzed. Clearly, educators are grappling with how to align standards with instructional observation. But the mere inclusion of or reference to CCSS ideas may not change practice and give teachers clear, actionable feedback on instruction that matters most to CCSS implementation. The experts recommended that CCSS, when integrated into observation frameworks and rubrics, should be clear, jargon-free and without redundancies of ideas and language. Frameworks and rubrics should give teachers feedback that helps them successfully implement the CCSS.

an important first step in designing observation frameworks and rubrics. To target professional development, for example, one district-level expert noted that an observer might use only part of an instructional observation rubric. Others remarked that it would be difficult for evaluators to find evidence for all the framework’s indicators if the tool is too cumbersome or redundant. Either way, the purpose is of the utmost importance in analyzing the usability of each tool. Experts suggested that defining purpose may be a good first step when creating or revising instruments.

A few of the frameworks and rubrics experts reviewed are streamlined, much less bulky and more focused. Two such tools, both inclusive of CCSS language and ideas, were created by a private organization and by an urban school district. They are six and 15 pages, respectively. They demonstrate the potential for creating instruments that are more usable for observers and teachers alike.

Streamlined tools can lead to more focused conversations about practice. They allow observers to use the resulting data in more timely and efficient ways. However, the experts struggled with the vagueness of some of the language of streamlined tools and pondered whether a tool can be too streamlined and therefore not illustrative enough. Streamlining inevitably sacrifices some concepts. The move away from overwhelming and unwieldy instruments is promising, but care must be taken that streamlining happens in a way that suits the purposes of the tools and includes high-impact practices for teaching to the CCSS.

In analyzing the frameworks and rubrics, the experts highlighted key practices that align with the new standards, and then talked about the importance of going narrow and deep. Although some tension arose around which elements of instruction are most important to the CCSS, one expert suggested the following practices:

- Use of academic vocabulary
- Use of representations and models
- Collaboration to deepen understanding of content



Principle Two:

The length of some rubrics and frameworks make them difficult to use. While developers should consider streamlining them, they must take care to ensure that the language of streamlined instruments does not become so vague that it fails to illustrate best practices.

The experts all found some of the frameworks and rubrics hard to use. Part of the problem is their sheer bulk. It is worth noting that many tools were cumbersome prior to the addition of CCSS ideas, and adding CCSS only created more bulk. One widely used rubric is 109 pages long. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether such tools align with the CCSS, simply because they are so cumbersome.

Their length also caused experts to reflect on the different purposes for such tools, such as for professional development, evaluation, general coaching or other goals. Defining that purpose is

- Ability to justify thinking orally and in writing
- Ability to model content as well as thinking

Although these are just suggestions, all of the experts agreed that these concepts reflect some of the most important ideas in CCSS and might provide a strong foundation on which to build or revise a framework or rubric.



Principle #3

Principle Three:

While issues of manageability, expediency and fiscal responsibility might require content neutral frameworks and rubrics, developers and users should find ways to infuse their use with grade-level and subject-specific content.

All of the frameworks and rubrics the experts analyzed were content neutral, which makes sense for practical reasons. As one expert from a urban district pointed out, training and norming on one instructional observation tool are challenging enough, but training and norming on several different grade-level or content-specific tools would be, in many cases, impossible.

But what is lost when a tool is content and grade-level neutral? Does it run the risk of being so general that it actually becomes meaningless? As one expert noted, tools that are content neutral and made for wide use may lack the disciplinary content important to the CCSS. This presented a challenge for all experts at the convening. Indeed, the CCSS require that students learn grade-level appropriate and subject-specific skills that build from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Experts wondered if a tool that is content neutral can meet the demands of teaching to the CCSS, which value and emphasize the differences in content areas and appropriateness for each grade level.

Some experts suggested that one remedy to this vexing challenge is to invest in content-specific observers who could use a content-neutral tool, but who also can give feedback specific to the disciplinary content and grade level observed. Another suggestion was to add “look-fors” or walk-through guides that are content specific and that can help observers assess

if teachers are teaching the important content of the discipline and grade. Ultimately, it is important that the discipline-specific and grade-level demands of CCSS remain central to the creation, revision and use of instructional observation tools.

In the process of building or revising observation frameworks and rubrics to reflect the standards, education leaders must avoid making such tools irrelevant or unusable because they are too cumbersome, confusing, jargon-heavy or lacking in content. Frameworks and rubrics could be more effective if focused on high-impact instructional practices that support CCSS implementation, and create meaningful connections to appropriate grade and discipline content.



Principle #4

Principle Four:

Almost all frameworks and rubrics focus on teacher, not student, behaviors or outputs. Regardless of the approach, designers and users should be able to articulate how student outcomes drive decisions about what is and is not included in the rubric.

Other questions raised by experts dealt with student outcomes. Experts remarked on how almost all instruments focus on teacher inputs and not student outputs. Yet all the experts agreed that student outcomes are the most important measure of how well educators are teaching and implementing CCRS. Experts debated where these student outcomes belong in an instructional observation tool or in an evaluation system. More than answers, the experts posed thoughtful questions that educators can use as a starting point when considering the effectiveness of their instructional frameworks and rubrics in producing student outcomes aligned with CCRS. Have, for instance, these teacher behaviors helped students learn in the past? Do students who are not the beneficiaries of these practices perform at lower levels?

Several experts liked the inclusion of student behaviors in some of the frameworks they analyzed, since this keeps the focus on student outcomes. But other

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experts suggested that the inclusion of student behaviors may distract teachers and questioned whether the student outcomes included in one State's rubric were aligned to the CCSS. Another expert noted that including student behavior could distract observers and teachers from the high-impact instructional practices that matter most for CCSS implementation. And finally, several experts worried that the inclusion of student behaviors and outcomes could make instruments too overwhelming and unfocused.

Although they did not reach a consensus on the use of student outcomes in frameworks and rubrics, it was clear that all experts want student outcomes to drive decisions about the content of instructional frameworks and rubrics. All agree that tools for instructional observation and evaluation are actually helping teachers ensure students develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in college and career.

Conclusion

Educators recognize the need to align CCSS implementation and instructional observation frameworks. Much promising work has already begun. Tight and effective alignment will occur when

streamlined frameworks clearly define high-impact instructional practices for CCRS. Leaders in the field of evaluation should consider how evaluators can use these tools and observation processes to give content- and grade-specific feedback. Furthermore, any organization that embarks on this work must clearly define its particular purpose for observing instruction. This will greatly impact the design and therefore usability of any tool. Finally, student outcomes matter. Educators should remain agile in creating and revising instructional observation tools to advance excellent teaching. Of the utmost importance is field testing to ensure that observation tools help develop teachers' practice in ways that will prepare students for college and career.

Alignment of the two reform initiatives—CCRS implementation and improved teacher evaluation—will not necessarily be easy. It will require stakeholders from across departments and areas of expertise to communicate effectively and openly with one another. The curriculum and instruction office, or the arm of any education organization tasked with implementation of CCRS, needs to work with human resources staff, or those implementing teacher evaluation systems. Further, districts could leverage content experts effectively so that teachers can receive appropriate feedback on specific CCRS content.

Although this work may be difficult, enormous benefits will accrue from aligning CCRS with instructional observation frameworks and rubrics. Together, both reform efforts can help ready a new generation of students for college success and graduation—and, ultimately, for success in careers that will enable them to support their families. Our nation is counting on it.

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